

Missiles for Everyone

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FOR THE PAST couple of months, the Bush administration has been trying to persuade Russia to go along with its plan for a "new strategic framework" including missile defense; now, with a summit meeting approaching next month in Shanghai, it says it will soon go to work on China. That's an effort that needs to be made; as we have said, a missile defense initiative that is carried out with the cooperation or at least acquiescence of the world's other nuclear powers could be an important addition to global security, while one that is launched over their opposition might well end up making the world more dangerous. As in the case of Russia, however, the administration's approach to China seems vague, even confused, in its aims. Some officials have been quoted anonymously saying the Bush team will tacitly accept China's continuing modernization of its nuclear arsenal and even renewed warhead testing if Beijing does the same for missile defense. On the record, senior administration officials deny that -- but don't say what the purpose of the coming talks will be other than to inform China about U.S. testing plans.

Judging from his public statements, Russian President Vladimir Putin has also been left confused by his recent meetings with several different senior administration officials. Some have seemed to suggest that the White House intends to announce U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty within a couple of months regardless of what Russia does, offering Mr. Putin the option of providing a facade of agreement to an essentially unilateral action in exchange for the prestige of being treated as a partner by the U.S. president -- and perhaps avoiding any serious questioning of his domestic behavior. Other officials hint that genuine negotiations are possible on an accord that would offer concrete U.S. assurances to Russia about the nature and scale of missile defenses, and include mutual commitments to new reductions in offensive arms. But which is it? Mr. Putin professes not to know: "We have a feeling that [the Bush] team has not determined some priorities yet," he told a Finnish newspaper.

As it firms up its bottom line for Moscow and Beijing in the coming weeks, the administration should seek to create a real structure for engagement on strategic issues. Rather than acquiescing in a Chinese buildup, or passively standing by in the conviction that nothing can be done about it, the United States should be seeking to curb or minimize it. A failure to do so would not only increase China's potential threat to the United States and its allies in Asia but also could make inevitable a nuclear arms race involving India and Pakistan.

Similarly, the Bush administration should seek commitments from Russia to reduce offensive weapons and safeguard its nuclear materials. And it should push hard to stop both countries from assisting in the missile and nuclear weapons programs of other states. If it were willing to make commitments about the shape and limits of missile defense, the Bush administration might well be able to win such cooperation from Moscow and Beijing. The danger is that, in its zeal not to be bound by any treaty or international constraint in its own testing and deployment of nuclear weapons and defenses, the administration will abandon the effort to limit them elsewhere. Maybe the United States would emerge supreme in such an arms-control-free world. But it doesn't sound like a very safe place.

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